

James: Taming The Tongue

James 3:1-12 My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. (2) For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. (3) Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. (4) Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. (5) Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! (6) And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. (7) For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. (8) But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. (9) With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. (10) Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. (11) Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? (12) Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.

This is a great passage of Scripture, and very challenging.

Who has never wished that they could take back something they said?

Words have power, and we're going to begin this message on Taming The Tongue by looking at three word pictures that James uses to illustrate the power of the tongue.

1. Three word-pictures

ILLUS – The first illustration involves horses. Is used to love horse riding, but they are such big animals. Did you know that horses can grow up to 1,000 kg or more? That's a lot of horse. And yet, even though you're only a fraction of the size of that horse, you can control it. Do you know how? You might think that to control an animal that size, you would need something pretty big. But you don't. All you need is a bit in that horse's mouth and you can turn that animal any way you want.

James is saying that the tongue is like that: Small, but very powerful.

ILLUS – The second illustration involves ships, so let me tell you about one of the world's biggest ships. It's the SS France. This ship is more than 316 metres long and weighs over 76,000 gross tons – huge! It's rudder is 74 tons. Now that might seem like an absolutely massive rudder, but that's less than .1% of the ship's weight. And yet, even though it's comparatively so small, that rudder can turn the ship wherever it wants it to go.

James says that the tongue is just like that.

ILLUS – The third involves fire. Fire is a very powerful force. One of the biggest bushfires in history was in 1851 where 12 people were killed, 5 million hectares of land demolished, and one million sheep died. Fire can be very destructive.

ILLUS – I remember when I was a boy and we were new immigrants in Australia, and my parents bought a block of land in the bush. We were there one weekend before we'd built anything on it and had a great idea. Coming from a cold, wet country to a hot, dry country, we had no idea how this would work out. But we thought, "Let's just burn this bit of rubbish we've got here." And so we did. And that little fire absolutely took off. Fortunately for us, it burned itself out. But bushfires begin that way, and they are powerful and terrifying.

James says that the tongue is just like that too.

It only takes a tiny spark to cause a lot of trouble.

Three word-pictures: The horse's bit, the ship's rudder, and a little fire.

The tongue is small, but very powerful.

2. Three glossal characteristics

You're probably wondering what that word "glossal" actually means.

It means "relating to the tongue", so we're talking about three characteristics of the tongue.

And we derive those three characteristics from the three word-pictures that James has in this passage.

The first glossal characteristic comes from fire.

Fires are uncontrollable, and the tongue is so often uncontrollable too.

I sometimes wish my tongue came with a CTRL Z function.

Do you know what a CTRL Z function is?

For those of you who aren't really into computers, it's the UNDO function on the computer.

You type something out, think, "Nah, that doesn't look right," and you press CTRL Z.

And it magically disappears.

Wouldn't it be great if your tongue came with one of those features built in?

You're blabbing away, shooting your mouth off, and suddenly you realise you're saying stuff you never should be saying.

But you think, "Not to worry. CTRL Z!"

And the words you shouldn't have said, somehow become unsaid.

What a pity it isn't like that.

Instead, the tongue is like an out-of-control fire.

And James is not saying that as a compliment.

The second glossal characteristic also comes from the fire.

Fires are far-reaching.

I'll bet that bushfire I mentioned earlier started with just a small fire, but then it spread, and spread, and spread, to the point where it destroyed millions of hectares of land and destroyed lives.

Once that fire starts, you don't know where it's going to end up.

There's a war-time saying: "Loose lips sink ships."

Loose lips sink ships – what does that mean?

In the context of war, it meant that you never knew who you were talking to, and one slip with some information that should have been kept secret, and ships could be sunk, hundreds of lives could be sacrificed.

I wonder how many lives have been destroyed because of careless words: Rumours started, Facebook wars, gossip perpetuated, people's reputations damaged.

All because of the tongue.

It's an uncontrollable fire.

The third glossal characteristic comes from the ship's rudder and the horse's bit.

What's the purpose of the rudder on the ship or the bit in the horse's mouth?

It's to steer; it's to direct.

What we say has a powerful influence on the course of our lives.

And I'm not just talking about the difference between and positive or negative confession; although there's a lot of truth there too.

But when we speak, we reinforce our own attitudes, positive or negative.

When we speak, others make judgments about us which influence decisions they make that affect us.

Words are very powerful.

3. A most mysterious verse

Verse 6 in our passage: And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell.

Most of this verse is not that hard to understand, but there's a tricky little phrase in there.

The NKJV says, "the course of nature"; NIV and NASB say, "course of life"; RSV says, "cycle of nature"; Good News says, "course of existence"; Vincent's says, "the wheel of birth."

Wow, that's a lot of different translations, all of which are not that easy to understand, and it shows how difficult it is to translate the original Greek in this verse.

The Greek in the first word of that phrase applies to anything round that runs or rolls like a wheel.

The last word means "beginning" or "birth" or "genesis."

So if we put both of those concepts together, it means: That which is set in motion at birth.

What does James say about that which is set in motion at birth?

He says that the tongue sets it on fire.

That harmonises perfectly with Proverbs 18:21: Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit.

The tongue is very powerful.

It sets on fire that which is set in motion at birth; and sadly, James says that the tongue itself is set on fire by hell.

4. Three word-pictures

You're probably thinking: Didn't we start with three word-pictures?

Yes, we did. But James has another three important word-pictures to illustrate more important truth.

First, he says that all creatures can be tamed; in other words brought under control.

We humans have dominion over all the creatures of this planet.

Yet we can't control our own tongues.

For the second word-picture, he asks the question: Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs?

The answer is: Of course not!

What a world this would be if we planted apple trees and they brought forth cherries; or we planted tomatoes and they grew pears.

The tree brings forth fruit according to the kind of tree that it is.

Our words indicate the kind of people we are, even as Jesus said (Mat 12:34) "Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks."

The heart brings forth words out of its own abundance.

Kind words come from a kind heart; angry words come from an angry heart; forgiving words come from a forgiving heart.

In the third word-picture, James asks, "Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening?"

And answers this in the following verse: Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.

If you're really thirsty, and you find a spring, and you try the water but the water is salty, it's no use continuing to try the water.

It's not going to change from being salty to being fresh.

If you want fresh water, you've got to try a different spring.

That brings us to our final point.

5. We must choose

Since the tongue is uncontrollable, and it speaks from the abundance of what's in the heart, we have choices to make.

We need to choose a different fruit tree; we need to choose a different spring.

We need to choose a different man.

Now, what does that mean?

Col 3:9-10 Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, (10) and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him,

Old man, or new man?

The old sinful nature which has been crucified with Christ, or the new you which was raised with Him to walk in the newness of life that God has planned for us.

The old man is a polluted spring that can only bring forth words that bring death.

But the new man is made in the image of Jesus and speaks words of life.

Our choice.

Let me close with a thought from Jesus and a prayer from the Psalms.

Mat 12:36-37 But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. (37) For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.

And here's the prayer.

Psalm 141:3 Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips.